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ABSTRACT

Staff burnout is a major hazard in outdoor wilderness education programs. Most susceptible are younger, first-time, idealistic, highly educated, overcommitted individuals who find difficulty in separating work from their private lives. Symptoms of burnout include decreasing concern, commitment, and enthusiasm; minimizing physical involvement with children through absenteeism, socializing with staff, or seeking managerial promotions; breaking down of the team concept among staff; exhibiting depressed behavior; deteriorating physical health; developing personal problems at home; creating emotional distance between the individual and the child; and maladaptive behavior by children in response to staff anxiety. The high risk, confrontational nature of adventure education, demanding work schedules, limited advancement opportunities, high staff turnover, friction between staff and supervisors, tenuous program funding, and substandard wages are among the causes of burnout. Recommended preventative approaches include reduction in successive days worked, rotation of positions and teams, weekly meetings, regular physical exercise, seminars on burnout, recognition for commendable work, establishment of mutual peer support systems, and involvement in organizational goal setting. Individuals should be aware of their personal motivation, contribute to open communication, and recognize that front-line involvement might be only two to three years maximum, to be regarded as a developmental position in their careers. (NEC)

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THE RECOGNITION AND MANAGEMENT OF BURN-OUT

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During the twentieth century the concept of job satisfaction[1] has received more attention than any other worker concern in North America. Two of the major antagonists of job satisfaction are what is termed as "burn-out"[2] and "rust-out"[3].

In corporate life at the management level both of these dilemmas cost organizations thousands of dollars. Since outdoor wilderness programs are a relatively young phenomenon in North America, many organizations have not been plagued by "rust-outs". For simplistic, economic reasons, few can afford having personnel exhibiting these characteristics and as a result these individuals are usually forced out of the organization. The crisis of the 80's in outdoor wilderness programs will be "burn-out" and therefore this paper will concentrate on this prodigy, particularly as it occurs in front-line positions.

Staff members who are most susceptible to "burn-out" are usually the most dedicated and committed. Unfortunately, these individuals lose site of, or do not know their own limitations. Consequently, they are unaware of what may be happening to them, and they become troubled by job fatique.

It is difficult to predict which staff members will suffer from serious stress but following Freudenberger's approach[4] the writer has begun to see a pattern emerging in outdoor wilderness programs. There appears to be two generic clusters of staff members who, like everyone, are products of their past. The

1. Job Satisfaction - The pleasurable and positive emotional state resulting from appraisal of one's job or job experiences.
2. Burn-out - To fail, to wear out or become exhausted by making excessive demands on one's energy, strength or resources. Burn-out is a threat to job satisfaction.
3. Rust-out - To stagnate and become obsolescent sometimes via the Peter Principle or the inability to cope with change.
4. H.J. Freudenberger, "Burn-out": Occupational Hazard of Child Care Worker, Child Care Quarterly

first group (the "street grads") are graduates of the street, or other child-care programs, or are products of broken, disturbed homes. The second group (the "academics") exude the qualities of dedication and commitment, and are college graduates. Both groups view themselves as possessing positive value systems, high motivation, a desire to be needed and a belief that through personal intervention that something can be done to help children. Similarly, they are not aware that day in and day out, they physically "feed" needy young children, and that they deplete themselves accordingly. The hazard of the "street grad" is usually a lack of awareness that he may be identifying with the child through his own unresolved personal problems and experiences. The "academic" is frequently quite innocent to job demands and may overtend, overgive, and attempt to help in ways that are destructive to both his peers and the children. One's basic emotions, needs, and unresolved problems come into play. These are used by the child to achieve his own power needs and trap staff members in a web mostly of their own making because of the lack of awareness of the inherent dangers that exist in treatment relationships.

Managerial staff in outdoor wilderness programs are sometimes individuals that have been "burned-out" in line positions and receive their promotions as a reward. Unfortunately, they may become victims of the Peter Principle[5]. Their positions have a higher public profile and their pressures may come from such situations as overwork, constant crisis intervention, a lack of reinforcement for their achievements and an urgency effect (every eight minutes most managers make a decision about something different). There does not appear to be a high correlation between good line workers and those that become good managers. When managers suffer from the stress plague, they exhibit many of the same symptoms as the line worker.

5. L.J. Peter, The Peter Principle, Bantam, New York, N.Y. 1969, p. 2 - 18.

Symptoms

Symptoms of burn-out vary with each individual and with each situation, however, the following are some common ones:

1. The individual seems unable to maintain his degree of concern, commitment and enthusiasm. One may begin to refer to children in derogatory ways or dread the thought, when at home, of having to return to work the next day. One may begin to perceive the child as somehow deserving problems - almost as if the child was "the enemy" out to intentionally make the staff member's life miserable. One may also develop a generally cynical and negative attitude.[6]

2. The individual may minimize his physical involvement with the children. This may result in the following behaviour:
   (a) an increase in absenteeism;
   (b) withdrawal to the staff office or coffee room for an inordinate amount of time;
   (c) using every possible opportunity to socialize with other staff;
   (d) seeking promotions or responsibility redesignations that involve less child contact.

3. The individual may act, look, or seem depressed. An individual may cry or yell very easily; on occasion be verbally or physically abusive towards children; be resistant to viable suggestions for work improvement; speak with sarcasm to children or fellow staff; feel their peers and the administration "don't give a damn" or "never listen to me"; try to "screw the system" by purposely stealing

6. J.D. Munro, "Preventing Front-Line Collapse within Institutional Settings" Hospital & Community Psychiatry, 1979.

or destroying property belonging to the facility; cut off communication, tend to withdraw and become a "loner"; become paranoid and feel that peers and administrators are "out to get him".

4. An individual or individuals may cause the team concept to erode and break down the trust and mutual support among staff. This symptom is demonstrated by the refusal to back up ideas initiated by fellow staff as well as back-biting by talking about other staff behind their backs. It may be shown by giving little or no support to new staff and expressing bitterness towards peers who have earned promotions.

5. An individual's physical health may deteriorate. One begins to suffer from insomnia, ulcers, migraine headaches, or lingering colds. In order to cope with these psychosomatic and general physiological difficulties, an individual may consume excessive amount of tranquilizers, tobacco, coffee, alcohol or other drugs. Sometimes personal hygiene may suffer.

6. Personal problems may develop. If stress cannot be resolved at work, then it is often resurrected at home. Frequent arguments with spouse, extra-marital affairs, or nightmares about work situations may be experienced by an individual.

7. The individual may intellectualize or use jargon when discussing children. This mechanism provides more emotional distance between the individual and the child.

8. The children may begin to act out the tension which has arisen among a staff team. As staff members wear down, the children manifest various forms of maladaptive behaviour (eg. temper tantrums) in response to the anxiety generated by a disorganized team of staff.

9. The individual may develop a "know it all" attitude that borders on condescension. This may include a tendency to be inflexible and almost rigid in thinking.

These represent only a few of the classic indications of "burn-out" and one must remember that most individual's reactions are also a product of their personality structure. Consequently, there may be wide variance.

Causes of Burn-out

Since outdoor programs vary dramatically in North America according to operating format and clientelle, each organization will have idiosyncrasies that enhance "burn-out". Some common elements are:

1. Adventure programs involve a high degree of risk which results in the staff members constantly walking a "fine line" regarding the safety of their children. The environment is constantly changing, and lacking in routine, and results in perpetual confrontation with the weather, geography and equipment as well as the clients.

2. The workload of a staff member is tedious involving long hours and demanding work schedules.

3. Opportunities for advancement and promotion are somewhat limited[7].

4. The job interferes with an individual's personal life because of emotional and physical demands and the geographical location of the program.

5. Many line staff have a lack of authority and influence which can encourage distrust relationships between managers and line workers.

6. Staff members are not always aware of the performance and evaluation criteria employed by their supervisors. Frequently, this causes much anxiety[8].

7. Adventure programs by definition expose their clients to experiential education situations. These individuals frequently lack sufficient self-motivation and as a result the staff members are required to be encouraging, confrontive and even aggressive at times. This process causes staff fatigue.

8. High staff turnover among front-line staff perpetuates itself. It results in programming inconsistency and poor morale.

9. Many outdoor wilderness programs lack solid funding mechanisms. The result is that staff members constantly feel insecure. This phenomenon may be fanned by political pressures or union activities.

10. Front line staff members usually experience a low status within the strata of an organization. This effects their morale and self-confidence.

7. J. Howard - Rusting Out, Burning Out, Bowing Out, Stress and Survival on the Job, Macmillan, Toronto, 1978, p.21.

8. S.B. Sarason, "Again, the Preparation of Teachers: Competency and Job Satisfaction," Interchange, Vol. 10, No. 1/1978-79, p.6-7.

11. The remuneration of staff members in outdoor wilderness programs in North America is inadequate. Substandard wages often force quality people to change professions.

Programs which deal with juvenile offenders have stress features which are compounded by their clientelle; security is a constant worry; physical aggression by clientelle is a threat; the poor motivation of the clientelle results in numerous runaways; frequently legal responsibilities are present; some programs have institutional demands which are very tedious for the line worker[9].

Preventative Approaches for Organizations

1. Front-line staff should be discouraged from working long stretches of days in succession. Long working hours are associated with increased stress and less job satisfaction.

2. Front-line staff should be rotated in their positions as well as their staffing teams. This serves to stimulate individuals.

3. Staff should be encouraged to build "time-outs" into their day[10]. Time-outs are not merely short rests from work (eg. coffee breaks), or guilt arosing escapes (eg. sneaking a 'smoke').

4. Opportunity for staff teams to have a weekly meeting should be provided.

5. To counteract emotional fatigue, front-line staff should participate in some form of regular physical exercise[11].

9. R.G. Dawson - "Staff Burn-out" unpublished Master's paper, University of Toronto, 1979, p.4.

10. C. Maslack, "Burned-out", Human Behaviour, Vol. 5, Sept. 1976, p. 16-22.

11. Howard, op. cit.

6. Special seminars should be offered to front-line staff so that they can more effectively identify and cope with the symptoms of burn-out.

7. Front-line staff need recognition when they have done particularly commendable work. Managers should devise methodologies for this to be accomplished.

8. It is important that the training of staff members is complimentary to the treatment model to be employed. Staff should be trained in the necessary 'on the job skills'. It should be noted that training is one mechanism that is effective in filling the void caused when working on the front line.

9. An effective mutual peer support system should be set up to compliment, aid and acknowledge the efforts of the staff teams.

10. Front-line staff should be aware of the short-term and long range goals of the organization for children and they should be an integral part of the planning.

Preventative Measures for Staff Members

The burn-out syndrome is a product of numerous combinations of situations and circumstances. But one must not neglect the individual and his/her own responsibility to fight the major worker disease of the 20th century. Occasionally one finds an employee who is almost purposely on a self-destruct

course. The following are a few suggested preventative measures that the front-line staff worker can employ:

1. The individual should be aware of his own motivation for working in outdoor wilderness programs. This will involve a questioning of geographical location, clientelle, and personal obligations. This self-awareness must be viewed realistically by each individual.
2. The individual should attempt to employ an equal energy investment to both their working life and their private life.
3. A trusting and mutually caring environment must be present and each individual should do their utmost to contribute. An effort should be placed on open communication.
4. An individual should be aware of crisis intervention scenes and be able to share this work load with fellow staff.
5. Two to three years is the probable maximum that most individuals can operate in a line position in an outdoor wilderness program. Individuals should recognize that it is a developmental position in their careers.

Dr. J. Howard's Five Effective Techniques for Reducing Stress[12]

1. Build resistance by regular sleep, exercise and good health habits.
2. Compartmentalize life into clearly defined work and non-work segments.
3. Let no other activity interfere with regular physical exercise.
4. Talk problems through with peers on the job.
5. Withdraw physically from the situation.

12. J. Howard, op. cit. p. 114, 115.

Howard emphasizes good health and exercise habits. They seem to be a key for outdoor wilderness programs.

After five years of working in outdoor wilderness programs the writer has observed the following:

1. That burn-out among staff is a low priority with most organizations and in fact some actually abuse people because of the lure of their programs.
2. That the younger the staff member, the higher the burn-out probability will be.
3. That if the position in an outdoor wilderness program is the individual's first professional one, then the burn-out risk is higher.
4. Overcommitment and idealism can be self-destructive of an individual, and usually are exhibited by people with higher education. The higher the level of education, the higher the frequency of burn-out. Unfortunately, our education system does not seem to adequately prepare its graduates for stress.
5. That individuals must separate their work life from their private life. This is especially important in regard to living residences, which must be physically apart from the working environment.
6. The more knowledge that staff members have about the impact of outdoor wilderness programs and their clients upon themselves, the better.
7. Communication is the best weapon against burn-out.

In conclusion, any individual involved in outdoor wilderness programs must be cognizant of the major hazard which is burn-out. To deny its presence or fail to attempt to combat it is managerial negligence and worker naivete. It is the major enemy of program consistency and the maturation and sophistication of treatment approaches in the outdoors. Consequently, it is the obligation of both the employer and employee to be aware of and deal with this challenge to job satisfaction.

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